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ABSTRACT

A number of past investigations have documented a relationship between height and personality for males and children. A study was conducted to discover the perceived personality characteristics dependent on women's heights. Subjects, 501 college students, responded to one of four pictures of two women, via a questionnaire, estimating personality characteristics and height. Findings indicated that as a woman is judged to be increasingly taller, she is concomitantly seen as increasingly dominant, loud, and mean. Her increasing height is inversely related to judgments of friendliness and perceptions of her persuasiveness are curvilinearly related to perceptions of her height. The overwhelming share of explained variance between height and these five descriptors is attributable to the single attribute of dominance. Since the sample of persons responding are both male and female, and have Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores two standard deviations above the American college norm, these results may be seen as distressing, implying possible negative orientations toward tall women of future upper management and corporate heads, as well as an indication of the disadvantages women may face in the world of work. (One figure is included, and 22 references are attached.) (SR)

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The Effect of Perceived Height on Judgments of Women's Personality Orientations

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Running head: Height and perceptions

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Abstract

A number of past investigations have documented a relationship between personality and height for males and children. This study sought to discover the perceived personality characteristics dependent on women's heights. A sample of 501 college students revealed that as a woman's perceived height increases so too do judgments of dominant, mean, and loud. Increased perceived height is inversely related to perceptions of friendly and the relationship for persuasive is curvilinear. These five judgments appear to be two primary factors of (1) communication orientation and (2) interpersonal orientation. The overwhelming share of explained variance between height and these five descriptors is attributable to the single attribute of dominance.

The Effect of Perceived Height on Judgments of Women's Personality Orientations

As social creatures, we affect and are affected by our social environment. In fact, this interactional idea lies at the heart of Charles Horton Cooley's theory (1902) of the looking glass self. Cooley postulated that we learn who we are by the verbal and nonverbal responses others give to us. We see ourselves in the mirrors provided by their eyes and in the echos furnished by their voices. Moreover, there is more than a little evidence to suggest that Cooley's theory is an apt description of the way in which the world actually operates (Eden & Shani, 1982; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968).

The process suggested by Cooley is particularly appropriate if we consider nonverbal attributes. Others, perceiving our dress, general attractiveness or even height, respond to us in systematic and predictable ways. Those responses set up behavioral reactions in us and we offer yet another cue to the other person. The process then continues unabated. The focus here is on that first nonverbal cue which prompts the initial reaction from the other. If that cue is a constant across our lives--for example,

height--would the summated reactions of all those collective others whom we encounter, structure our self-concept and even mold our personality? A growing body of evidence suggests that the answer is yes.

In the area of measured personality attributes and behaviors, as contrasted with perceived attributes, several past studies have examined the link between height and a variety of personality orientations. One such study found that short boys (ages 6 to 16) tended to "exhibit a withdrawing response style" (Holmes, Hayford & Thompson, 1982, pg. 63) more often than might be expected; moreover, short children have been shown to possess poor social judgmental ability (Stabler, Whitt, Moreault, D'ercole & Underwood, 1980) and short boys in the third to fifth grades are more likely to exhibit impulsive behavior than their taller classmates (Kagan, 1966). Another study of 6 to 12 year old children found shorter children exhibited significantly higher rates of reported parental behavioral difficulties, increased social withdrawal and schizodal tendencies (Gordon, Crouthamel, Post & Richman, 1982). Among a sample of male college students, Hood (1963) found significant differences on the Mf and D scales of the MMPI between tall and short males. Interestingly however,

attempts to locate a link between height and self-esteem among college age young adults have found no relationship (Coopersmith, 1967; Hensley, 1983; Prieto & Robbins, 1975). The link between height and personality is obviously not a simple one.

Studies of perceived personality traits for taller persons require more closure on the part of the reader. Hensley and Cooper (1987) surveyed height and occupational success going back to the turn of the century. Their review highlighted the advantages taller males have in obtaining jobs. It can only be assumed that height, at least for males, must be associated with perceived ability, achievement orientation or perhaps dominance. More directly, Gacsaly and Borges (1979) found an interaction between height and body build in the judgment of the male physique. The general effect of height was always positive (leadership ability, preferred personal friend, being a good father). Overall, the perceived traits accompanying taller males are very positive.

Despite the growing interest in the concomitants of height and personality, all these studies taken together have a fragmentary quality. The majority of the investigations apply only to males or children making

global generalizations hazardous. In the present study the focus is on perceived personality traits of women especially as those perceived traits vary with height. In that sense, the primary question to be addressed is: what are the comprehensive personality dimensions associated with women's differing heights?

Method

The respondents in the present study were 220 males and 281 females, all in their late teens and twenties, enrolled at a large mid-Atlantic American university. These 501 students were shown black and white pictures of two women, each of whom was depicted in two modes: once with dilated pupils, once with constricted pupils. The respondents were told that all of us "form impressions of others" and that we were attempting to understand "how people arrive at those impressions."

Materials

The four pictures were high resolution copies of the same ones used by Hess (1975). Each picture was examined by a panel of independent judges to insure that the pupillary dilation was unequivocally obvious.

There was unanimous agreement among the judges that the pictures met these standards.

Each respondent was provided with a questionnaire having one of the four pictures attached. Also presented were a number of attributes recently explicated as measures of categorization levels in the perception of extraversion and intraversion (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987). These included, unattractive, socially-skilled, religious, nervous, dominant, funny, self-confident, socially offensive, persuasive, outgoing, argumentative, well-dressed, nutty, insecure, mean, dynamic, studious, meditative, intelligent, friendly, loud, shy and ambitious. Using a scale from 9 to 0, respondents were asked to indicate whether the women shown definitely possessed the characteristic (9) or definitely did not possess the characteristic (0).

Also measured at the same time was the estimated height of the woman in the picture. It is to be emphasized that each respondent was free to construct whatever cognitive picture seemed most appropriate. By using facial photographs with no other cues available, the conceptual "package" assembled is both unique and, hopefully, highly consistent for

each respondent. That is, the attributes and the height created in respondent's minds are a coherent whole.

Procedure

Self-selected seating in college classrooms is not random (Levine, McDonald, O'Neal, & Garwood, 1980; Pedersen, 1977). Knowing this, the four forms of the questionnaire were systematically arranged one after the other. Therefore, when the forms were distributed, we were insured a stratified sample of any personality/attitudinal orientation which might threaten the external validity of our results. Questionnaires were distributed from front to back in each sampled class. All respondents were free to refuse participation in the study but only one person in the entire sample did so.

As we have previously noted (Hensley, in press), the pupillary dilation effect is widely discussed in the behavioral sciences. It was therefore necessary to check for prior exposure among our respondents. After completing the forms, all respondents were asked to "tell us what this study was about" in their own words. Any questionnaire mentioning anything about eyes or height was discarded.

Results

Before continuing it would be well to disarm any fears of contamination due to the use of photographs depicting pupillary dilation. As I have detailed elsewhere (Hensley, in press), the effect of pupillary dilation was virtually nonexistent. Nevertheless, this main effect was statistically removed from all analyses by the use of MANCOVA.

The distribution of perceived women's heights was plotted to determine if there were any naturally occurring divisions to use as categories in our analysis. Fortunately, the data fell into six distinct groupings: (1) 5 feet, 4 inches or shorter (N = 52); (2) 5 feet, 5 inches tall (N = 105); (3) 5 feet, 6 inches tall (N = 115); (4) 5 feet, 7 inches tall (N = 98); (5) 5 feet, 8 inches tall (N = 65); and (6) 5 feet, 9 inches tall or taller (N = 45).

The initial MANCOVA indicated that the two photographs used in the study had been differentially evaluated (Pillais' Trace = .1187; Wilk's lambda = .8813; $\underline{F}$ (27, 314) = 1.567; $\underline{p}$ = .039). After checking to verify that none of the interactions with height were significant, a second MANCOVA controlling for both pupillary dilation and the two pictures was

performed. The second MANCOVA revealed there were some differences between the perceptions of males and females (Pillais' Trace = .1572; Wilk's lambda = .8428; $\underline{F}$ (27, 347) = 2.3980; $\underline{p}$ = .000) but there was no interaction between sex and the height perceptions (Pillias' Trace = .3868; Wilk's lambda = .6663; $\underline{F}$ (135, 1716) = 1.0910; $\underline{p}$ = .234). Since the focus of the present study is not in describing how the genders differ, further examination of these sex-based differences will be deferred until another time.

The primary goal of the present study was to examine how the perceptions of a woman's height affect our impressions of her personality orientations. The data reveal there is a strong set of differences in those perceptions which covary with height (Pillias' Trace = .4571; Wilk's lambda = .6127; $\underline{F}$ (135, 1716) = 1.3486; $\underline{p}$ = .006). Moreover, the view is similar for both males and females given the lack of any interaction discussed above.

The emerging picture, while clear, is not flattering. As a woman is judged to be increasingly taller, she is concomitantly seen as increasingly dominant, loud, and mean. Her increasing height is inversely related to

judgments of friendly and the perceptions of her persuasiveness are curvilinearly related to perceptions of her height. Short women are not as persuasive as are women of moderate height (5' 6" to 5' 7") with taller women (5' 8" or taller) being the least persuasive of all.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Actually, the judgments do not appear to be five separate evaluations upon further analysis. Factor analysis indicates a two-factor oblique solution. The variables/factor loadings of dominant (.69), persuasive (.46), and loud (.38) load on the first factor which appears to measure a communication orientation. On the other hand, friendly (.59) and mean (-.94) seem to measure an interpersonal style. The correlation between the two factors was .26. In summary, then, as a woman is perceived to be taller, she is also perceived as being dominant--in the sense of overbearing--less persuasive and loud. In addition, she is unfriendly and mean.

The final question to be asked is to what extent do these perceptions

of personality orientations explain the estimations made of height? Multiple correlation reveals that these five attributes, taken as a group, explain 7% of the variance of height (R = .264; F (5,472) = 7.092; p < .0001). Interestingly, the simple correlation between the attribute of dominant and estimated height is .2256. Thus, the other four attributes are little more than window dressing in terms of explained variance.

Discussion

Admittedly, the results found here are distressing particularly if one happens to be a taller woman. But, when one pauses to consider the sample of persons responding, what began as distress quickly turns to despair. First, the perceptions chronicled are independent of gender. Both males and females have an equally negative view of tall women. Thus, the taller woman has no haven of refuge save perhaps among other taller women. Second, the respondents in this study are not simply another group of American university students. The university population from which this sample was drawn has an average entering SAT score of 1122 vs. a national norm of 906. These students are approximately two standard deviations above the American college norm (K. Wendler, ETS, personal

communication, November 17, 1988). The implications of these data now appear in greater clarity. The bias against tall women expressed by our respondents are the orientations of tomorrow's upper management and corporate heads.

Moreover, it now seems clear why women are at a disadvantage in the world of work. The height advantage for men (Hensley & Cooper, 1987) does not extend to the taller woman because of negative attributions and those advantages do not extend to the shorter woman who may find it difficult in being taken seriously. In common parlance, the situation is called "no win."

In retrospect, the findings of the present study simply extend a line of research already well documented. In their overview of attractiveness, Berschied and Walster (1974) wrote that height "may account for a fair portion of the attractiveness variance, particularly in men . . ." (pg. 178). The advantages of height do extend to males (Hensley & Cooper, 1987) in the world of work. However, another well known research finding has demonstrated that attractiveness actually works against women in the work world (Heilmann & Stopeck, 1985; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979;

Hickling, Noel, & Yetzler, 1979). Since (a) height is a functional aspect of increased attractiveness and (b) enhanced attractiveness is a negatively valanced attribute for females it is therefore is reasonable that (c) increased height should be a negative attribute for women.

We must hasten to point out that at no point in the present study were the respondents ever specifically asked to envision the pictured women in the work situation. This line of research has been cited simply to illustrate that negative evaluations of attractive females is not a totally unknown phenomenon. In the same sense, it should be acknowledged that our results probably also have a strong social component, in that vein, the negative judgments are a new dimension in the perceptions of women.

While the results detailed here are a clear case of gender bias, there is a ray of hope to be found. At the very least, before one may begin to combat bias, the nature of the bias must be understood. In that sense at least this study has taken an initial, albeit tentative, step. It can only be hoped that much more research concerning women's height will be forthcoming to shed new light on this important area of concern.

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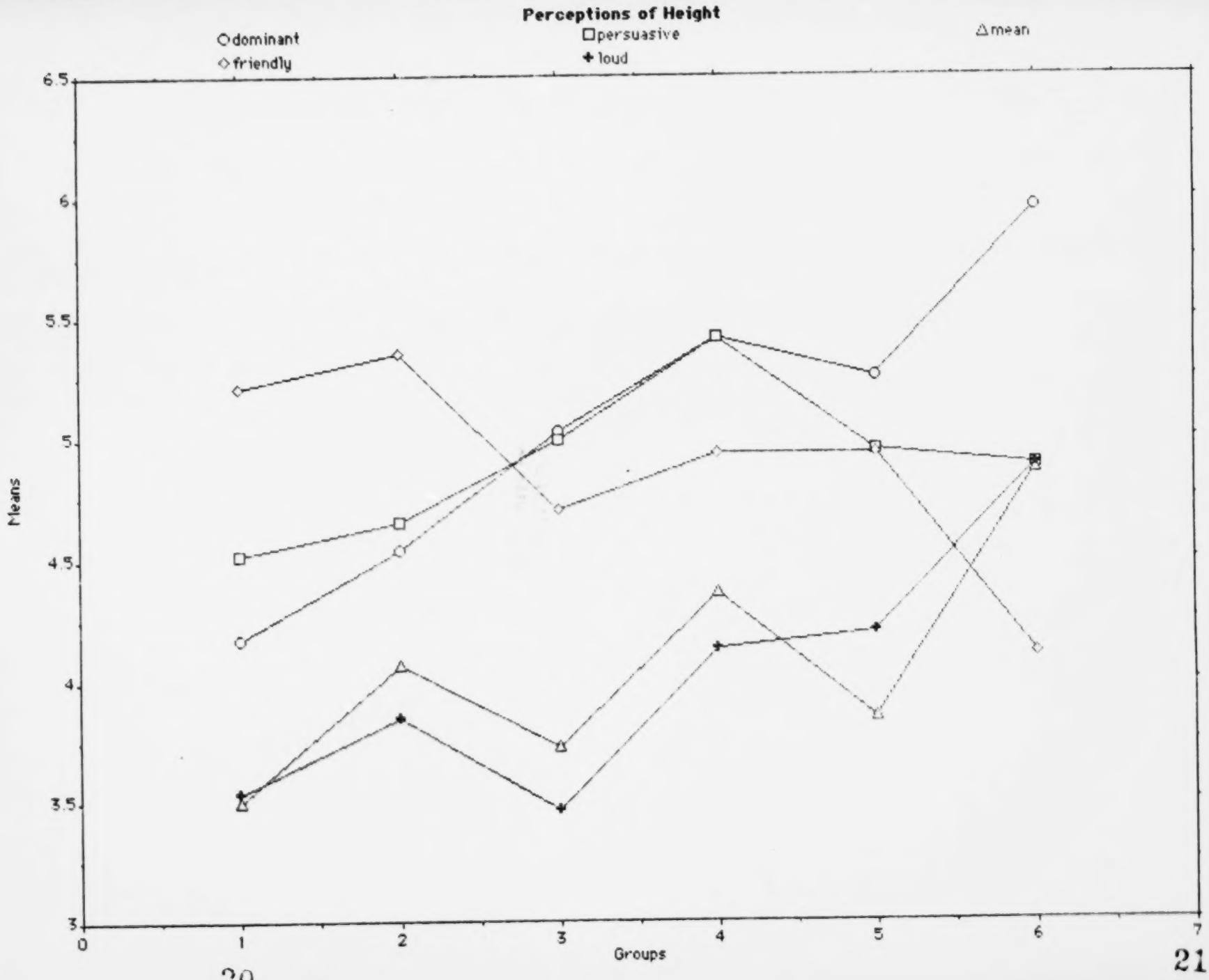
Perceptions of Height
○dominant
◇friendly
□persuasive
✚loud
△mean
6.5
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Means
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Groups